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ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS (summer)

Since it's the end of the year, I'd like to summarise a few issues which are very topical to this subject, and also encapsulate short term goals for us in the beloved country.

The big news just now is the recapitalization of the taxi industry, and this reminds me what a critical thing transport is to accessibility. I have no idea what all the political complications of this are, but it must bring into focus how important it is going to be that it be suitable for the broad range of people. A Short Term Strategic Framework on Accessible Transport (Version 4) published in April 2003 set out clearly its objective: "The objective of the strategy is to improve access to transport for disabled persons, in a manner that promotes integration into the mainstream of public transport." And further "..... promote seamless and hassle-free travel chain for disabled travelers." And all this under legislation directives which ask for this to be done within 5 years! It all sounds as if attitudes are right and definitely in line with universal design principles. Transport is one of the key stumbling blocks to the integration of disabled people into society and the workplace, and many wealthy countries also find that it is really difficult to get the general public to accept mainstreaming as the civilized approach.

We've all got used to the 'dropped kerbs' at road crossings. Durban has been particularly good at incorporating these into the city. Incidentally when they were first brought into the public domain by wheelchair users, the vision impaired sector was horrified. Vision impaired people used to rely on knowing when they have reached a junction between a pavement and a road by being alerted by a kerb; now it would be completely seamless! The 2 sectors got together and devised the raised bubble pattern on the dropped kerb, so that it could fulfill both functions! What I'm really getting to is that there is such a thing as a 'raised kerb' too. I was delighted when I first heard of it, but disappointed in that it is not promoted in the transport industry, here or in Europe. I think so much work is going into the changes required to the vehicles, that this has been neglected. What appeals to me is that the public transport need not do gymnastics to kneel, or have folding out ramps, or lifts.

This is an illustration of one in USA, but with a bit more work on it, it could become an ordinary piece of street furniture like a bus shelter. It is also useful for guiding the passengers on in a more regulated manner, and with handrails, it is a universal design example.

My next thoughts are with the revamping of the 'deemed to satisfy' parts of the SABS 0400, now to be called SANS10400. (National Building Regulations) This is the non statutory section, but nevertheless will have influence over the built environment. I believe all of the parts are undergoing the same process, but I have only been involved with Part S: Facilities for Disabled Persons. The final draft was issued on 17 September 2004. It has now become a much wordier document and I think entrenches the separateness of Disabled people; even the title says so. There are two charts which are set out as guidelines for achieving access with which I don't agree. The one is for ramps, and the other for heights of lettering on signs at various distances. Recently I have done some in depth study on this subject, and came across a chart in a book published for use by the different transport authorities in Europe called " COST 335, Passengers' Accessibility of Heavy Rail Systems". It is such a nice rule of thumb that I think everyone should use it. Often these 'rule of thumb' formulas do get confusing: as you can see the dividing factor under the line should be 25-30, not 250mm-300mm. (Perhaps something like this has happened in our own document.) This formula is for size of lettering, but there are also many other factors such as font, case, tonal and colour contrast, thickness of letter which apply, but at least for designers or facilities managers knowing the correct size is a good start to choosing the positioning. The crusading continues!

"If you aint gotta dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?"
Bernstein

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